

## **LENNON AND STEINHOFF, PLANTING SECRETS**

Jonathan D. Steinhoff, January 19, 2008

The announcement in 1980 in the press that Lennon was planning the release of a new album, “Double Fantasy”, was something that filled me with more personal excitement than anyone else in the world. One might argue, however, that there was more personal excitement in it for Lennon - one would be wrong but one could argue it. It was Lennon’s first album in five years, the longest he’d ever gone without releasing original songs since he first began his relationship with the world.

Lennon’s previous album of original songs, 1974’s “Walls and Bridges”, was released while I was working for a close friend of Lennon’s, Howard Smith, the man who introduced Lennon to his home, New York City. It happens that “Walls and Bridges” contains a number of inside references for my benefit (<http://www.archive.org/details/LennonAndSteinhoffAnIntroduction>). Yet though identification of Lennon’s inside references was as simple as adding two plus two for one in possession of the facts, the criteria for identifying a nutcase has throughout all eternity always been, determine whether or not the potential lunatic thinks the crazy Beatle is planting secret messages for him. Well, very sorry, but look somewhere else for the façade of common behavior and common observations in response to extraordinary matters. You don’t know Lennon, not even if you spent a year with him, if you don’t think he was capable of injecting his work with things directed at specific individuals, not just general categories of individuals.

Upon graduating from CalArts Film/Video School in 1978, there were a few brief moments when it appeared that I might be working for either Lennon or McCartney. In fact, the person from whom I first learned of CalArts, the school I attended, was a friend of Lennon’s, and would one day head David Geffen’s film production company (this before the day Geffen formed Dreamworks with Spielberg and Katzenberg, but after the day Lennon was shot while with Geffen).

In 1979, when I was living in New York City, I remarked to someone with whom I worked (a former Bella Abzug, George McGovern aide and friend of then-House Speaker Tip O’Neill), Robert Rickles, my interest regarding what had become of John Lennon. Within one week Lennon and Ono took out a full page ad in The New York Times entitled, “An Open Letter To People Who Ask What’s Become Of Us”.

But it was now 1980, I was living in Denver, and “Double Fantasy” was on the way. I knew who I was in the world in relation to Lennon and certain others, even if I didn’t possess the fame or money you would expect to find superimposed over such a soul. Under these circumstances, I suddenly felt specially entitled to provoke reactions from the people where I worked to the name John Lennon. I understood that intermediaries for Lennon and others were never far, but didn’t the world also contain those with animosity towards all things Lennon.

When I raised the subject of John Lennon’s upcoming new album, the woman with whom I shared an area of an office appeared to feel great exasperation, and clearly sought to provoke my reaction, saying, “Why should John Lennon have to do another album? Hasn’t he done enough yet? Hasn’t he done enough? What do people want from him!” On the off-chance that a Lennon intermediary was at this moment, on Lennon’s behalf, requesting an explanation from me, which was a pretty obvious possibility (obvious if you knew all the Lennon-type stuff that had preceded this moment over the years, regarding which I’ve scarcely scratched the surface here), I

responded calmly to the exasperation, though the tone cast me as some sort of random, unrelenting fan.

The opening track on “Walls and Bridges” contained the phrase, “Something precious and rare disappears in thin air”. I suddenly chose “precious” as my word of the day. I said “precious” about ten times in my response. “Lennon must realize that he possesses something very precious to so many people, and that when this precious thing disappears, it, there’s a group of people that exists because of Lennon and this precious thing he possesses, and this group of people doesn’t exist without Lennon. And this group of people can accomplish something, they have something precious because of Lennon.” The sense I got from the woman I was speaking to was sort of like, and who cares about them? Explain why he should care about them. I felt as if I was being asked, right then and there, to justify why Lennon should do the album, what it meant. Coming from me, it might just add up to something, that was the potential inference. I was made to feel that the microphone might just be on, so to speak.

Two other co-workers with whom I spoke, though not at the same time, each had responded, “Didn’t Lennon already do an album called, ‘Imagination?’” How did they each, independent of each other, came up with the same wrong word in place of “Imagine”? Either they had agreed to do so beforehand; either they had been instructed to do so beforehand without knowing the other had been similarly instructed; or, who knows? They got their story straight, but it was still wrong. I’ve encountered a lot of this kind of thing, usually regarding things of a more serious nature.

The opening song on “Double Fantasy”, “Starting Over”, opens with a section that reflects what I said, completed by attitude reflecting Lennon’s take on the idea. We were both aware that beneath these words was room for different levels and meanings, which can become the nature of things that enter the realm of creating art. For example, in this song one hears a clear reference to ‘50s rock and roll, as if to suggest that a soul trapped in the past, imploring the listener to return to the lifestyle of “the early days”, must also resurrect a buried culture.

Around this time, and I wish I could pinpoint it chronologically, though it was definitely prior to “Double Fantasy”, I made the extreme decision to throw out my record album collection. I felt that after one accumulates albums for most of one’s life, the albums must inevitably become permeated with invisible energies/baggage. Loud music in a room can predominate over your thoughts, and these albums, even when not being played, could predominate in other ways. Food in your refrigerator can have a presence you detect even when you’re in the living room, though if the same food had stayed in the supermarket it would be closed off altogether from having any kind of presence in your living room. I understood the music was great, and as art, beyond whatever subjectivity any listener might happen to personally associate with it. Nevertheless I felt I should get out from under it all at least once in my life. Plus, the records were all scratched up.

I put the records in the trunk of my old car, but as the trunk never closed right, I had to use a bicycle strap, which only partially closed it. I hadn’t yet decided whether I would dump the albums ceremoniously, or just dump them, so I left them in the trunk of the car for around a week. A friend of mine was curious to know why I had my albums in my car trunk, so I said I was looking for a buyer. Whenever I hit a bump in the road an album or two would slide out into the road. My friend (who would later introduce me to a recording engineer from Lennon’s

“Imagine” album after Lennon was dead), didn’t understand why I wasn’t stopping to retrieve the albums that fell out. However, he finally let it go.

Finally it became time for me to “start over”. I couldn’t last forever without buying any more albums, so I bought just one album, which was from a nearby used record store, “Nilsson Sings Newman”. I thought it could be a great rebirth for me, if I just kept it for a while as the only record in my collection. It would renew in me a tangible sense that one album could be special, instead of being one among hundreds and hundreds (and hundreds).

On the day “Double Fantasy” was due to arrive in stores, it didn’t. “Saturday Night Live” tried to interview the men who picked up garbage at Lennon’s residence, The Dakota, asking if they knew what had happened. They didn’t.

Someone who worked where I worked, John Derr, had once asked me to recommend him so that he could live in my apartment building, and I obliged. He had once been in a rock group, Rats, which he said had been an opening act for Badfinger (a group The Beatles had helped a lot with a label and some songs). As the release of “Double Fantasy” approached, he mentioned that he had been on an album produced by Jack Douglas, who co-produced “Double Fantasy”. When he quit Rats, Doug Feiger of The Knack replaced him (this preceded the Knack chapter of Feiger’s career). I once had a half-hour conversation with Feiger about John Derr, and he disputed the idea that Rats had anything to do with Badfinger, or that Derr had anything to do with Jack Douglas. He did verify a story Derr told, that when Derr quit Rats his girlfriend took up with Feiger, his replacement. In any event, it was John Derr, a few days after the original “Double Fantasy” release date, who told me I could find the album at a local shopping mall, Cinderella City. Interesting that the album has a song, “Yes, I’m Your Angel”, with Cinderella references (“We believe in pumpkins that turn into princess”; “...if we hurry home before midnight strikes”), and a song, “Cleanup Time”, with a reference to rats (“No rats aboard the magic ship of perfect harmony”), though nothing specific about rats turning into people, as they do in the story of Cinderella.

The song “Cleanup Time” also included the phrase, “However far we travel, wherever we may roam, the center of the circle will always be our home.” I note this because on the one album I owned after I threw away all of my other albums, “Nilsson Sings Newman”, there is a song, “I’ll Be Home”, which features the phrase, “Wherever you may wander and wherever you may roam.” This may be a phrase heard before Newman’s usage, but this is clearly (okay, clear only if you’re not stupid) well beyond the normal law of averages that the album I had that stood apart from all others, “Nilsson Sings Newman”, should include a phrase that would eventually match something on “Double Fantasy”.

When I saw the cover of the “Double Fantasy” album, in addition to noticing the obvious reference to the iconic Beatles album cover, “Abbey Road”, I was immediately dismayed to see Lennon’s residence, The Dakota, included. Though it was common knowledge that this was where Lennon and Ono lived, showing The Dakota on the album cover seemed to read a little bit like an invitation to everyone. The value of unlisted numbers and addresses is commonly known, especially in New York City. A photo is in the category of offering to draw someone (everyone) a map.

Lennon’s action was totally, perfectly aligned with the spirit and character of the first person singular in the Newman song sung by Nilsson to which I’ve referred, “I’ll Be Home”. Yet in

real life, for a John Lennon to intimate so great a willingness to occupy this role of reliability and accessibility to everyone everywhere seemed to me tremendously dangerous. I hope I wasn't the only one who noticed this. You can't take on every nut in the world (and you can quote me). I remembered the exasperation leveled at me when I was asked why Lennon should do another album: didn't I think he had already done enough? I felt as if my statement, that he had an important role, that his not performing it would vanish a group of people in terms of their being a group, had been misread into the false notion that I didn't think he had done enough. It pained me to consider that this interpretation of my words, and then giving my words too much weight, might have pushed Lennon.

With the cover of "Double Fantasy" depicting Lennon and Ono in front of their home, The Dakota apartment building, I believe Lennon understood that he was becoming the embodiment of the character in the song, "I'll Be Home", only on a massive, nearly messianical scale. Lennon was a big Randy Newman and Harry Nilsson fan, there's no telling what fans will do.

My argument, and the cause of the concern I felt at the time, is that it generates an enormous sense of one's (a former Beatle one's) accessibility to the world to publicize a photo of oneself in front of one's New York City address, though that being one's address is already widely known. The outcome in the case of Lennon tends to validate my view on how that form of accessibility reads in the minds of the world's mentally disturbed.

Perhaps Lennon becoming super-accessible/vulnerable to the world in this precise manner was a real part of his character, a direction no one could have pushed him towards or away from. Then again, perhaps if I had started the rumor that his house was on fire he would have given up on the idea and found another place to be.